

CHAPTER ONE

*Only victors have stories to tell,
We the vanquished were then
Thought of as cowards and weaklings,
Whose memories and fears
Should not be remembered.*

Guy Sajer
The Forgotten Soldier.

Traveling backwards through a tunnel of white light, grey shadows lurked either side. *Was it the tunnel to heaven or to hell; it must have been hell because the light wasn't pulling in, but seeming to push away. Heaven surely rejected my soul at the gate,* he thought.

The white light yellowed and the shadows grew darker and took odd mutant shapes. Demonic beings mouthing unintelligible words reached out with their claws. The lights above flickered on and off, from darkness to light. It was the pathway to hell; he was sure of it.

As he regained focus and clarity, the white tunnel formed the shape of florescent ceiling lights. Emergency crew workers and doctors talked but he couldn't make out any of their words. Several policemen escorted the gurney with his body strapped down and his right hand handcuffed to a metal bar.

He rolled his eyes backward, straining to see his destination, but his body was immobile. His senses were completely dull. The only thing that seemed to be working was his mind. He tried to recall what got him in such a predicament. *What happened?* he thought. His mind was a

blur and thinking only aggravated his aching head. An overwhelming wave of pain gripped him and he vomited and seized.

The emergency crews wheeled him into an operating room. The white light that shined overhead only made his seizures worse. He barely felt a nurse wipe the vomit from his face and place a plastic mask over his mouth. His eyes fluttered and the bright light slowly dimmed to complete blackness.

A few hours later, he awoke in a hospital bed. Nausea filled his stomach and if he had any strength at all, he would roll over and vomit on the floor, but all the wires and tubes attached to every orifice made movement impossible. He was prisoner to the queasiness and all he could do was bare through the best he could.

It was a few years ago when Deni Daudov was sixteen; he slumped beside his sister Lulii with his head drooping forward. He was so hung over from drinking with his buddies the night before that he could barely lift his head and watch his brother, Mikail, tie the knot.

The ceremony was held at Reading Pennsylvania's Muslim Center—the only one in Berks County where the Muslim population was low. He even checked the statistics. The only religious groups that were less populous in the heavily German Christian town were Buddhists and Hindus. He wasn't sure about Wiccans; he didn't know if the census covered them.

He wasn't bothered by the statistics. No one in his crowd cared anyway. At sixteen, religion was at the bottom of a beer bottle, the tip of a joint and in the pants of an easy girl. Nothing else really mattered. Life was fine.

The monotone voice of the Muslim Cleric bellowed in Deni's ear like that of a loud, slow moving engine. The sound made Deni's head throb and his stomach swirl. The only thing that gave him comfort was his drifts in and out of sleep. His head bounced like a basketball and with every drop; there was a sudden jolt to lift his head up.

His mother, Kamiila, reached around the back of the chair and swatted him on the head to sit up and pay attention. He opened his eyes and stared at the elaborately designed altar. He nearly hurled, but somehow managed to keep from making an entire mess of the ceremony.

Glancing over he admired Mikail's bride, Jamie Unger. She had the perfect Pennsylvania Dutch face, deep set light brown eyes, soft round cheeks, and perky pink lips. She looked even more beautiful behind the white veiled hijab; she appeared angelic. *Mikail is a lucky dude. I hope one day I find such a beautiful wife*, Deni thought.

But it wasn't just Jamie's beauty that inspired Deni; it was her loyalty and devotion to his brother. She had left her Methodist faith for him; she had given herself fully to Mikail. A man can have many goals in life—success, fame, money, but a beautiful, devoted wife trumped everything.

After the ceremony, Deni sat at a linen draped table and played with his food with his fork. Although starving, his stomach was far from settled. Heavily spiced foods would only ignite a very unpleasant fire in his belly. What he needed was some hard cooked scrambled eggs and dry toast—a feast fit for a hangover.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around to find his mother, Kamiila, with a young girl about his age. *She is not bad looking, but a little plain with a few red pimples.*

“Sweetheart,” Kamiila said to Deni, “this is Enya. She and her family are from Armenia.”

Deni turned around and extended his hand to her. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Enya replied bashfully.

“Enya is in your same class only she goes to Governor Mifflin.” Kamiila pulled out a seat for Enya. “Why don’t you two get to know each other? I’m sure you have a lot in common.”

When Kamiila left them alone, Deni and Enya sat awkwardly.

“I’m sorry,” said Enya finally breaking the silence.

“Don’t worry,” Deni replied. “My mother is strong-willed especially when she’s trying to set me up.”

Enya laughed and dumped her forehead into her fist. “I know. I am so sorry. I just couldn’t say no to her.”

Deni gazed beyond Enya’s immediate flaws. She was a beautiful girl and it was evident she had a beautiful soul that warmed him to her. The truth was a man knows when he meets the one; all other girls before that are just to pass the time. There were the girls guys will spend a few intoxicating, orgasmic minutes, and perhaps even a night with; there were girls like Enya a boy will give his respects, but will never lose his heart to, and then there was the girl that stopped his heart at first glance.

The hospital room was dark and quiet except for an annoying beeping that monitored his heart. *The joke was on that damn contraption, my heart already stopped beating,* he thought.

The door opened and a white-haired, bearded doctor entered and approached his hospital bed. He lifted his patient chart and read the details: Name: Deni Alexei Daudov; Age: nineteen; Birthdate: September 24th 1994; Born: Grozny, Russia; Height: five-ten-and-a-half; Weight: one-hundred and sixty-five pounds; Eyes: brown; Hair: brown; Condition: serious—five gunshot wounds, severe exsanguination, dehydration, and exposure.

The doctor set down the chart and checked Deni’s monitors. Glancing over his shoulder, he gave him a bit more morphine.

“Deni, what did you get yourself into?”

Deni glanced up at the doctor; he could barely recognize him, but from his voice he knew it was Heather’s father. *Shit, Dr. Atkins,* he thought.

“Of all your victims in this hospital, it is you Heather is most concerned about. She begged me to check on you; I simply cannot deny my daughter. All the young men, she saw it all in you.” He looked down at Deni. “Why would you throw away your life?”

Even if Deni had the answer, physically he was unable to speak and unable move. He blinked and then stared at Dr. Atkins blankly.

Dr. Atkins breathed deeply and said, “For my daughter, I wish you my best. It’s probably much more than you deserve.” He left without another word.

It was only the first day of his senior year of high school. Everything was in line for a great year. Deni had a place on the varsity football team as a wide receiver and he had many friends. There were plenty of parties and of course, there were always girls.

When he walked into advanced history class, one of his classmates yelled, “Hey Daudov, wanna show us where you’re from on the map?”

Deni stood and walked to the front of the class where a world map hung over the chalkboard. With the aid of the teacher’s pointer, he tapped a place in southern Russia, “born here,” dragged the pointer due north on the map to central Russia, “moved here and theeeennn,” with a dramatic sweeping motion across the map, he pointed to eastern Pennsylvania, “came here.”

Their advanced history teacher, Mr. Hoffman entered and said, “Are you teaching today’s class?”

“No,” Deni said politely and handed the teacher the pointer. He bowed before the class which gained applause and laughter.

Deni sat down in his seat. Glancing downward, a pair of long legs caught his attention. He followed them upward and gave the girl a double take. Her name was Heather Atkins; she was the most gorgeous girl he had ever seen—shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair, large blue eyes and the perfect amount of freckles on her nose and cheeks. But it wasn’t just her looks; last year she was editor of the school newspaper, class vice-president, she ran cross-country, played girls’ basketball, and was on the soccer team. For her senior year hoorah, she scored a place on the varsity cheerleading squad.

Heather studied Deni with an inquisitive look and then noticed the textbooks he was carrying—physics and calculus. Sure he played the role of jock and class clown, but she suspected there was much more.

“Now that was entertaining,” she mocked.

Deni gave her a hard look. She didn’t have a hair out of place on her perfect head, but she wore very little make up and the only jewelry was her diamond stud earrings. He didn’t respond, not knowing if her sarcasm was out of meanness or jest.

The team’s first game was away against Lancaster which ended victoriously for the Red Knights, so everyone on the team was in the mood to celebrate. Deni strode into the party with his wide receiver pals: Tyrone “T-Bone” Dawson, Devon “De-vine” Russell, and his childhood friend, Hector “Ramone” Ramirez. Walking two feet above the ground, he was not only high on weed but high on life. He scored two touchdowns that night and after he finished scoffing down a bag of potato chips, he was looking forward to scoring otherwise.

Outside on the back of Eric’s patio, Heather nursed her beer. She had never been one for the heavy-duty party scene and was always concerned about the dangers of substance abuse and drinking and driving, but there was something about the need to fit in and loosen up her inhibitions. She found herself in the hard place of being a good girl and wanting to let her hair down.

Standing outside, she heard T-Bone's loud raucous voice and she knew the wide receivers had made it to the party. She also noticed the posse of girls, who followed them around, also made it. Wanting and needing another drink, she walked into the kitchen for a beer.

T-Bone looked at Heather and joked, "Who invited the nerds?"

"Funny, Dawson." Heather saw Deni fishing into a bag of potato chips like they were the last bag on earth. "I will have you know T-Bone, that your buddy here," she pointed at Deni, "is in my advanced history class."

"Of course he is; he's Russian," said T-Bone.

Heather laughed uncontrollably. "I'll let that go because I can tell you guys have been dipping into the herb, but I'll also have you know, that he carries around physics and calculus books. Your boy, Daudov, is a nerd!"

Deni looked at her shocked as potato chip crumbs fell from his lips. "Why would you say that?"

"Ha! Nerd, unless you're carrying those books around to impress the nerd girls," Heather said with a laugh.

Everyone in the kitchen started laughing. Deni pleaded to T-Bone. "It's all a dirty rumor. Shit, I don't even know what calculus is." He looked at Heather. "Is calculus a growth on your foot?"

"Don't play dumb Daudov; you're smart." Heather got herself another beer. She walked back out onto the patio and sat on a plastic cushioned bench.

"That's a nasty thing to say to someone you hardly know!" Deni shouted from inside the house. He couldn't believe the nerve of that girl. *Who the fuck is she to go calling me out like that?* He was going to show her.

Monday morning rolled around and Deni took his seat next to Heather in advanced history. She glanced over at him and noticed he had his calculus and physics books wrapped in plain brown paper. She laughed out loud.

"What?" he asked innocently.

"Subtle dude, but seriously, plain brown paper will always arouse suspicion."

He wrapped his arms around his books. "Perhaps people shouldn't be so nosy about other people's business."

"Perhaps people shouldn't be ashamed to be what they are," she said smartly.

"Have I done something to offend you?" he asked.

She laughed. "You think I'm offended. No, you got it wrong. You entertain me."

Deni slumped in his seat and stared ahead at the chalkboard. "Whatever."

When class was over, Deni and Heather walked out together. "So what class do you have next?" Heather asked.

Deni peeked underneath the brown paper of one of his books. "It's either calculus or remedial math."

"Have fun nerd," she replied with a wink and a smile.

Deni watched Heather walk away and disappear into the crowded school hallway. She was a dangerous girl. She was the kind of girl who could easily break a guy's heart if he let it stray. Her smile and her laughter could make a guy believe he even had a chance. At that moment, Deni convinced himself he didn't have a shot, so why bother trying.

If he felt any remorse at the moment, it was for Heather. It was a choice on his part not to fall in love, or try not to. Perhaps in hindsight, it was a bad decision as now he is alone and handcuffed to a hospital bed. He figured there would be plenty of time to ponder regrets. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

It was later in the night when he a stab of pain woke him. He lay in bed and glanced over at the morphine drip; he didn't even have the energy to press the button for the nurse. "Everywhere," was all he could mutter.

Under the glaring bright lights in Norristown, Pennsylvania, Deni caught the football. He was immediately sandwiched between two defenders and then shoved out of bounds. He fell onto the gravel sidelines and skinned his forearm to his elbow. The pain was excruciating, but it was the sight of blood that caught the attention of his coach and team doctor.

He winced when the trainer applied antiseptic to the wound and then wrapped it in gauze and white first-aid tape. It wasn't too long until he was back in the game taking more punishment from the opposing, molesting defense. He loved football and finding cunning ways to escape a tackle, but tonight, the Norristown defenders knew his every move.

After the game, Deni's entire body ached. Norristown was always so hard-hitting and he had mentally prepared for the hits, but still, the fatigue and physical pain existed. He never really felt any pain while on the field, normally all the pain came right as he stepped out of the shower. As soon as he was washed clean of the grime and grit of the playing field, the pain hit him.

Players were beginning to fill the bus's seats. The cheerleaders were seated waiting eagerly for their favorite player or boyfriend. Deni headed towards the back of the bus which was where T-Bone usually hung out, but three-quarters of the way back he saw Heather seated alone with her bag marking the seat next to her. When Deni made eye contact with her, she removed her bag and nodded to the seat.

"What the heck," Deni said, spinning into the seat. He grabbed a water bottle from his backpack.

Heather studied him carefully. His hood was pulled over his head and his eyes were dark. She could see the fatigue and pain in his expression. "Rough game."

"We lost," he replied.

"I know; I was there," she said with a wink.

He slumped in his seat. "Give me a break, will ya? My body aches everywhere."

"Everywhere?" she questioned.

"Ev-ver-ry-where," he repeated and took a swig of water.

Heather sunk in her seat. "Well, have a shoulder. We have a long ride home."

Deni slid down in his seat and rested his head on her shoulder. It was so nice to sit there silently. He glanced down at her perfectly manicured nails and the rings on her fingers. They were like the hands of a doll. He wanted to touch them, but didn't dare. When he looked upward he saw Heather watching him through the reflection of the bus window. "What are you looking at?"

"You," she said with a smile. "You're a mystery to me, just trying to figure you out."

"Ha!" Deni grunted. "That's a waste of time if ever I heard."

"It's my time," she said strongly.

Deni sighed and lifted his head. He reached in his bag and pulled out a packet of Ding Dongs. He opened the plastic wrapper and offered one to Heather. "You want half of my Ding Dong?"

Heather laughed and reached inside the packet for one of the cakes. "Sure. It's nice to see your mother taught you sharing."

Deni shoved the Ding Dong in his mouth, licked his fingers and rested his head back on her shoulder. "Sharing is caring."

It was close to midnight when the school bus pulled up in front of the steps of Reading High School. The team was asleep, including Deni. Heather was wide awake. As they made their way off the bus, Deni let Heather walk in front of him. She turned to him as she stepped from the curb to the bus. "Can I give you a lift home?"

"Sure, why not?" he said.

As they walked to the parking, Deni saw the lights of a white BMW blink. "This is me," said Heather as she opened the passenger side door for Deni.

"Nice ride," he said.

"It was my sweet sixteen birthday present," Heather said as she started the ignition.

"I gotta cake," he said smugly.

"Cake. Is that what we're calling it these days?" Heather laughed. "From what I hear, you gotta lot more than cake."

"Rumors, nasty rumors," he said.

"Everything seems to be a nasty rumor with you." Heather laughed and pulled out onto the street. The drive home was quiet. Occasionally she would glance over to see him shrouded by the hood of his sweatshirt. Deni felt a little more than uncomfortable riding in the BMW. It's not that he didn't like Heather or felt he didn't deserve the luxurious ride; he was just more than suspicious of the gesture. *What does she want with me?*

Pulling to the curb outside the Daudov's modest income row home in the north west part of Reading, Deni got out of the car. He hesitated before closing the door. He glanced back inside and said, "Uhm, I'll see you around."

"Yeah, guess we'll see each other in class," replied Heather.

"Right." He paused, tapping his hand on the top of her car. "Thanks for the lift...and the shoulder."

She smiled. "Anytime."

Deni waited for her car to drive out of sight before walking inside his house. When he entered the house, he turned off the living room light his parents left illuminated for him. Quietly, he tiptoed up stairs and stopped in the bathroom. He gave himself a quick glance in the mirror, wondering what the heck Heather saw in him and then opened the medicine cabinet door for the bottle of aspirin. He swallowed two tablets with water, brushed his teeth, and headed to bed.

Saturday night, he did something he hadn't done since he was fourteen...he stayed at home with his parents. In fact he was beginning to believe he was infringing upon his parent's mojo. Both were shocked to have him home.

Shortly after dinner, he filled the tub with hot water and half a carton of Epsom salt. Submerged in the water, his mind strayed to Heather. He simply couldn't stop thinking of her. So captivated by his thoughts, he didn't notice the bathroom door open.

"Deni," said his father, Bashir. "Are you okay? Your mother sent me in to check on you."

Deni finally realized his bath water had gone cold and his fingertips were like dried prunes. He reached for a towel. "Yeah."